

## PERINATAL LESSONS FROM THE PAST

# Thomas Malthus (1766–1834): population growth and birth control

Peter M Dunn

Thomas Robert Malthus was the second and last son in a family of eight. He was born with a hare lip and cleft palate at the Rookery, near Dorking in Surrey on 14 February 1766. His father Daniel, a close friend of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, arranged for him to be educated privately. In 1784 at the age of 18, he entered Jesus College, Cambridge, where he skated, rowed, played cricket and had a lively social life. He also won prizes for declamations in Latin and Greek, and in 1788 graduated as Ninth Wrangler. The same year he took Holy Orders and in 1796 accepted an Anglican curacy at Albury in Surrey. Meantime he had been made a Fellow of his college and resided there intermittently until 1804 when he married Harriet Eckersall. The following year he was appointed to the East India Company's newly founded college at Haileybury as the first professor of political economy in the British Isles (fig 1).

In 1798 Malthus had published, anonymously, *An essay on the principle of population as it affects the future improvement of society*.<sup>1</sup> In it he called attention to the disparity between the rate of population growth and the slower increase in the food supply. War, famine, and disease, he pointed out, had to be the eventual alternatives to the limitation of family size. His book caused furious controversy and led him to prepare a more scholarly work. First, though, he took two extensive tours on the continent with friends, collecting statistics and noting local customs and social history. He also made a careful study of population trends in North America. His second book, published in 1803, was a much larger sociological treatise deploying a mass of data in which political philosophy gave way to political economy and to the notion of moral restraint. The controversy continued. His publisher John Murray wrote: "It has been frequently remarked that no work has been so much talked of by persons who do not seem to have read it!" The book went through several editions, and in 1830 he published yet a third work entitled: *A summary view of the principle of population*.<sup>1</sup> The extracts from these works that follow give the flavour of his ideas and philosophy:

"I think I may make fairly two postulata. First, that food is necessary to the existence of man. Secondly, that the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state ... Assuming then my pos-



Figure 1 The Rev Thomas Robert Malthus, 1766–1834.

tulata as granted, I say, that the power of population is infinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second. By the law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of man, the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal. This implies a strong and constantly operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence. This difficulty must fall somewhere and must necessarily be severely felt by a large portion of mankind...."

"This natural inequality of the two powers, of population, and of production in the earth, and that great law of our nature which must constantly keep their efforts equal, form the great difficulty that appears to me insurmountable in the way to the perfectibility of society...The checks which repress the superior power of population, and keep its effects on a level with the means of

Department of Child Health  
University of Bristol  
Southmead Hospital  
Southmead Road  
Bristol BS10 5NB  
P M Dunn

Correspondence to:  
Professor Peter Dunn.

subsistence, are all resolvable into moral restraint, vice and misery. "... this constantly subsisting cause of periodical misery has existed ever since we have had any histories of mankind, does exist at present, and will for ever continue to exist, unless some decided change takes place in the physical constitution of our nature."

"Positive checks ... are extremely various, and include every cause ... which in any degree contributes to shorten the natural duration of human life. Under this head, therefore, may be enumerated all unwholesome occupations, severe labour and exposure to the seasons, extreme poverty, bad nursing of children, great towns, excesses of all kinds, the whole train of common diseases and epidemics, wars, plague, and famine."

"And if, from the laws of nature, some check to the increase in population be absolutely inevitable, and human institutions have any influence on the extent to which each of these checks operates, a heavy responsibility will be incurred, if all that influence, whether direct or indirect, be not exerted to diminish the amount of vice or misery."

Malthus argued against the widely held view of his day that a nation's resource was determined by the size of its population and that fertility added to national wealth. From his humane concern for the sufferings caused by overpopulation arose his anxiety that the poor-laws should not lead to a relaxation of moral restraint and large families. By moral restraint he meant delayed marriage and sexual abstinence for adults until they were economically able to support their children. While it was generally supposed that Malthus was in favour of contraception, in fact as an Anglican minister he disapproved of it. However, others took a different view and the English sociologist, Francis Page, himself the father of 15 children, drew attention to the value of contraception in the 1820s, writing: "... once it has become the custom ... to limit the number of children so that none need have more than they wish to have, no man will fear to take a wife, all will be married while young—debauchery will diminish—while good morals, and religious duties will be promoted."<sup>3</sup> The movement for birth control gradually gained momentum in the years that followed with the final breakthrough in the next century, thanks in particular to two remarkable women, Margaret Sanger in the United States and Marie Stopes in Great Britain.

In 1819 Malthus was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, in 1821 a member of the Political Economy Club, and in 1824 a royal associate of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1834 he was one of the cofounders of the Royal Statistical Society. Honours also came to him from France and Germany.

Thomas was a very pleasant, shy, and scholarly man who was popular with his students; they called him "Pop." His marriage to Harriet was a happy one and they had a son and two daughters. The family remained at Haileybury for the remainder of his life. In 1834, at the age of 68, while on a visit to his wife's family home near Bath, he collapsed and died. He was buried in Bath Abbey. His old friend from Cambridge days, Bishop Otter, wrote his epitaph:

"Sacred to the memory of the Rev Thomas Malthus, long known to the lettered world by his admirable writings on the social branches of political economy particularly by his essay on population. One of the best men and truest philosophers of any age or country, raised by native dignity of mind above the misrepresentations of the ignorant and the neglect of the great, he lived a serene and happy life. Devoted to the pursuit and communication of truth, supported by a calm but firm conviction of the usefulness of his labors, content with the approbation of the wise and good, his writings will be a lasting monument of the extent and correctness of his understanding. The spotless integrity of his principles, the equity and candour of his nature, his sweetness of temper, urbanity of manners, and tenderness of heart, his benevolence and his piety, are the still dearer recollections of his family and friends."

In 1838, four years after Malthus' death, Charles Darwin, back from his voyage on HMS Beagle (1831–6), was searching for a mechanism to explain the transmutation of species. On reading Malthus' essay on the principle of population, he at once grasped the possible implication of the checks that controlled population growth and wrote: "...favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed ... The result of this would be the formation of a new species. Here, then, I had at last got a theory by which to work." Twenty one years later he published his famous book *On the origin of species by means of natural selection*.<sup>4</sup> It too raised a storm of controversy and protest.

Today, 200 years after Malthus first published his ideas, his message remains prophetic. Epidemics may be less lethal and crops more abundant, but populations are still outstripping food production in many parts of the world, and wars remain as destructive as ever.

1 Malthus T R. *An essay on the principle of population* (1798) and *A Summary view of the principle of population* (1830). Flew A, ed. London: Penguin Books, 1970.

2 Anonymous. Robert Malthus. [Editorial]. *BMJ* 1966;3:698-9.

3 Place F. Cited by H Speert In: *I conographia Gyniatria*, Philadelphia: FA Davis & Co, 1973:443.

4 Darwin C. *On the origin of the species by means of natural selection*. London: John Murray, 1859.